

The Alienation of James Baldwin

By John Henrik Clarke

The now flourishing talent of James Baldwin had no easy birth, and he did not emerge overnight, as some of his new discoverers would have you believe. For years this talent was in incubation in the ghetto of Harlem, before he went to Europe nearly a decade ago in an attempt to discover the United States and how he and his people relate to it. The book in which that discovery is portrayed, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), is a continuation of his search for place and definition.

The hardships of that search were recently described by Sterling Stuckey, Chairman of the Committee of Negro Culture and History:

The tragedy of the American Negro is born of the twin evils of the slave experience and varying patterns of segregation, supported by law and custom, that have been nation-wide in dimension for a century. The consequences of the Negro's quasi freedom, unfolded against a grim backdrop of two and a half centuries of slavery, have been no less destructive to his spiritual world♦his hierarchy of values and his image of himself♦than to his every day world of work.

This quasi freedom of the Negro is often more humiliating than slavery and more difficult to fight, because it gives the Negro the illusion of freedom while denying him the fact. Thus the Negro continues his alien status in a country where his people have lived for more than three hundred years. *The Fire Next Time*, like most of Baldwin's writings, is about this alienation.

Two essays, one long and one short, make up the book. The short essay, "My Dungeon Shook," originally appeared in the *Progressive* magazine. The long essay, "Down at the Cross," originally appeared in the *New Yorker* under the title, "Letter From a Region in My Mind," and the issue in which it came out is now a collector's item.

Baldwin more than any other writer of our times, has succeeded in restoring the personal essay to its place as a form of creative literature. From his narrow vantage point of personal grievance, he has opened a "window on the world." He plays the role traditionally assigned to thinkers concerned with the improvement of human conditions♦that of alarmist. He calls our attention to things in our society that need to be corrected and things that need to be celebrated. The narrowness of his vantage point is no assurance that he is right or wrong; nor does it negate the importance of what he is saying. The oppressed person is the best authority on his oppression.

Racism in the United States has forced every Negro into a prolonged and pathetic war. He is either at war against his oppression or against the weakness within himself that frustrates his ability to participate in this war effectively. The saddest participants in this war for mental and physical survival and basic human dignity are those Negroes who think that they are removed from it♦those who live with the illusion that they have been integrated. The limitation and uniqueness of Baldwin's vantage point is that he is addressing his audience from the war zone.

The first essay, subtitled "Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," is Baldwin's advice to a young relative entering the area of racial conflict on the anniversary of the proclamation that is supposed to have set his people free. The thrust of the author's eloquent anger is deep.

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being.

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You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.

Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and how you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry. I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying, "You exaggerate." They do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you. Take no one's word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go.

This is close to the root of the matter. The Negro was not brought to the United States to be given democracy. When the promise of democracy was made, it was not made to him, and this is the main reason why the growth of democracy in this nation is retarded. Nonetheless, Baldwin advises his nephew not to despair:

You came from sturdy, peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity. You came from a long line of poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said: "the very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off." You know, and I know that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon.

The long essay, "Down at the Cross," is brilliantly written, though much too long and involved for the meagerness of its message. In essence, it consists of Baldwin's reflections on growing up in Harlem and on how this ghetto upbringing influenced him. Baldwin's evaluation of the Black Muslims and their leader, Elijah Muhammad, tells us more about the author than about his subject. As a guest in the home of Muhammad, he seems to have vacillated between personal attraction and ideological estrangement. He speaks of his host as follows:

I felt that I was back in my father's house—as indeed, in a way, I was—and I told Elijah that I did not care if white and black people married and that I had many white friends. I would have no choice, if it came to it, but to perish with them, for (I said to myself, but not to Elijah) "I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?"

But the people in control of the power structure of the United States have already answered Baldwin's question in the negative. This answer is one of the main reasons for the existence of the Black Muslims, for in spite of all that can justifiably be said against them, they have found what most Negroes are still searching for—a way of reclaiming their dignity as human beings.

Baldwin is a highly regarded intellectual, the most honored Negro writer since Richard Wright. Yet the word struggle, inseparable from the existence of the Negro people, rarely appears in his work, nor as a novelist has he yet created a single Negro character who attains stature in a fight against his condition. Neither does he show any awareness of the economic base for oppression. These are serious limitations in a man hailed by many as the spokesman for his people.

There is a tangential aspect of Baldwin that requires brief comment. That is the cult of white followers that has grown up around him. These disciples flock to all his public appearances as to some masochistic ceremony of penance. It is as though they cry out: "Oh, Jimmy, punish us for the sins we have committed against your people." Tears yes, actions never. For them Baldwin has become a sponge, soaking up the wastes of their conscience. In fairness to Baldwin, one must say that this cult is not of his making nor is it under his control.

A lot of people are hearing Baldwin's words but missing his message. What the Negro wants is justice, not sympathy; and if justice is not forthcoming, there may well be "the fire next time"—and sooner than we think.

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